FACTSHEET

Plant Protection & Quarantine

United States Department of Agriculture

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

June 1995

Miami Plant Inspection Station

Americans have grown accustomed to seeing a large and healthy selection of plants when they go to their local nursery to purchase a leafy ficus tree or a climbing philodendron or some other exotic plant variety. However, most people do not realize the long journey the plant has taken from Central America or some other foreign home and the careful measures the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has taken to ensure the plant is pest and disease free.

Each year, APHIS officers inspect an estimated 460 million plants that are mailed, carried, and shipped into this country by brokers, travelers, and nursery owners. Some of these flowers and plants carry hitchhiking pests and diseases that are foreign to the United States and could cause great harm to the Nation's agriculture. The golden nematode, the Mediterranean fruit fly, and citrus canker are just a few of the harmful pests and diseases accidentally introduced into this country in the past.

To monitor plants and plant products entering the country as well as to inspect them for the possible pests and diseases they may be carrying, APHIS' Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) program has established 15 plant inspection stations at select ports of entry throughout the country. At these plant inspection stations, PPQ inspectors work with scientists—including entomologists, botanists, and plant pathologists—to locate, examine, and identify pests and diseases.

The Miami Team

The Miami plant inspection station staff performs 80 percent of all U.S. inspections. In fiscal year 1994 alone, the Miami staff of 10 inspected almost 400 million plants. This heavy workload is primarily attributed to the station's site at the Miami airport, which is centrally located for not only air cargo but also a multitude of shipping companies that are importing mass quantities of products from Central America, South America, Europe, and the Caribbean.

When the Miami plant inspection station first opened its doors in 1947 to serve just a small number of shipping companies, PPQ officers had a light inspection load of only about 100,000 plants annually. The import and export plant trade grew each year thereafter, and although the station expanded in 1979 to meet the needs of the ever-increasing shipping industry, the station has once again outgrown its home. Officials project that the station will move to a new and improved site by 1999 because the number of imports and exports the Miami team handles will continue to grow as international trade opens new doors and invites more marketing.

The Miami staff consists of two entomologists, who identify insects, a botanist, who identifies noxious weeds, a plant pathologist, who identifies diseases, and several inspectors, who examine cargo for pests, diseases, and noxious weeds. Four of the inspectors are also backup identifiers for the specialists. To quickly and efficiently inspect the large quantities of perishable cargo received at the station each day, PPQ inspectors and the specialists work as a team. PPQ inspectors also work cooperatively with importers and rely on them to provide the proper documents for each of their shipments.

Importing Plants

To import foreign plants or plant products, an importer must apply for an agricultural import permit from the PPQ Permit Unit and secure a phytosanitary certificate from the exporting country. Phytosanitary certificates verify that the plant quarantine officials of the exporting country have examined the plants for pests and diseases prior to their leaving the country. U.S. importers should plan ahead and secure their agricultural import permits for their shipments far in advance of their transport. Import permits may be obtained from:

USDA–APHIS–PPQ Permit Unit
Unit 136
4700 River Road
Riverdale, MD 20737–1232
Telephone: (301) 734–8645

When a shipment arrives in the Miami plant inspection station, PPQ inspectors collect phytosanitary certificates from the importers. Typically, inspectors examine one or more boxes of each variety of the plants and seeds being imported. The inspection process includes a meticulous examination of the leaves, stems, and roots of the plants. With the exception of only a few specified types, plants must not be rooted in growing media, such as soil, because insects, diseases, and noxious weeds could hide there. Inspectors also ensure that the plants are a manageable size for the inspection process.

When PPQ inspectors discover a pest, disease, or noxious weed, they take a sample and complete an interception form, which describes what they have discovered and identified. The sample is taken to the proper scientist, who confirms the identification. Inspectors refer all insects or pests to the staff entomologist, who examines them and determines the extent of harm they could cause to America's agriculture. If the entomologist determines that an insect or pest is actionable—meaning it is not known to exist in the United States or it exists in limited distribution—the plants are fumigated, reexported, or destroyed. After fumigation, the inspector releases the plants to the importer and allows them to enter the country. Should the entomologist determine that the insect or pest is not harmful and poses no economic threat to U.S. agriculture, the inspector releases the plants to the importer. A similar procedure is followed when plant diseases or noxious weeds are intercepted with plants.

CITES Enforcement

Like all PPQ plant inspection stations, the Miami facility has been approved by the U.S. Department of the Interior to inspect any plants and plant products, like exotic orchids and cacti, that are protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). In fiscal year 1994, the Miami staff inspected almost 15 million CITES-listed plants and plant products. PPQ inspectors are required to inspect each and every one of the CITES-listed plants to ensure that the plant specimens match the description of the accompanying CITES documents. If the importers do not have the proper CITES documents, PPQ inspectors must seize the plants and offer them back to their country of origin at that country's expense or place the plants in one of the many Interior-designated rescue centers in this country, where they are displayed for the public to enjoy.

Mailing Plants

Importers may mail plants and plant products directly to the Miami inspection station. If you are interested in doing so, please contact the PPQ Permit Unit at the above listed address.

In addition, inspectors strongly recommend the following:

- Pack the plants in sturdy boxes or crates.
- Indicate what is inside the package by marking the outside.
- Use APHIS' green-and-yellow mailing label to ensure proper handling of your package. (These labels are included when a permit is issued.)
- Send the packages by priority mail.
- Enclose a note with your name, mailing address, and permit number, so the inspectors can forward the package to you after the inspection.
- Enclose the proper postage fee for forwarding the plants to your address.

Exporting Plants

The Miami plant inspection station team also works closely with exporters. The staff issues phytosanitary certificates for plants and unmanufactured plant products to ensure that U.S. shipments are not carrying pests and diseases. In 1994, the Miami staff completed almost 9,000 phytosanitary certificates.

Help Keep Pests and Diseases Out

Whether you are mailing a boxwood home from England, carrying propagated orchids back from Thailand, or shipping a load of philodendrons from Central America, USDA encourages you to follow the proper procedures for importing plants and plant products.

For more information about the Miami Plant Inspection Station or importing or exporting plants through Miami, contact:

USDA–APHIS–PPQ
Miami Inspection Station
P.O. Box 59–2136
Miami, FL 33159
Telephone: (305) 526–2825
FAX: (305) 871–4205